

“I don’t think I’m a racist”: Critical Race Theory, teacher attitudes, and structural racism

Sabina E. Vaught^{a*} and Angelina E. Castagno^b

^a*Department of Education, Tufts University, Medford, MA, US;* ^b*Educational Leadership and Foundations, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, US*

This article is an ethnographic examination of teacher attitudes towards race, racism, and White privilege in response to anti-bias in-service trainings in two major U.S. urban school districts through the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory. We employ the analytic tools of Whiteness as property to make sense of the messages teachers perceived and developed about race and racism. Further, we examine what teacher attitudes reveal about the structural dimensions of racial inequity in schooling and achievement. We argue that the racial attitudes expressed by teachers in this study are illustrative of larger structural racism that both informs and is reinforced by these attitudes and their manifestation in practice.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; teacher training; Whiteness; race; teacher attitudes

In attempting to understand the racialized components of schooling and achievement, scholars have recently examined teacher attitudes in relation to race (Kailin 1999; King 1991; Ladson-Billings 2000a). To complement and extend this good work, we examine teacher attitudes towards Whiteness and White privilege in two major urban school districts through the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory. Specifically, we focus on the racialized responses of both White teachers and teachers of color to anti-bias or anti-racist in-service teacher trainings in both districts. In this context, we ask the following questions: (1) what messages about the nature of race and racism did teachers take from the trainings, (2) what structural limitations do these messages reflect, and (3) how does Harris’ (1993) concept of Whiteness as property illuminate the relationship between the individuals and the structure, between equality and equity? Our data indicated that the messages teachers took and also created from the trainings were grouped under three interconnected themes: White privilege, individualism, and cultural awareness. So, in response to our questions, we argue that these thematically-grouped racial attitudes expressed by teachers in this study are illustrative of larger structural racism that both informs and is reinforced by these attitudes and their manifestation in practice. Importantly, we will share and analyze teachers’ reactions to the trainings; we are not making evaluative claims about the effectiveness of the trainings from our own perspectives. Here, we are mainly interested in teachers’ perceptions of the trainings and how teachers, as agents of action in the classroom and with children, reacted in racialized ways to what they perceived they learned in the trainings. In leveling a structural critique through analysis of teacher reactions, we do not imply that teachers should not be accountable for creating equitable classrooms, nor do we suggest that there is no room for investigating both best (Ladson-Billings 1994) and worst practices (Ferguson 2001;

*Corresponding author. Email: Sabina.vaught@tufts.edu

Valenzuela 1999). Rather, the purpose of this article is twofold: first, to employ the analytic tools of Whiteness as property to make sense of the messages teachers perceive about race and racism; and, second, to examine what teacher attitudes reveal to us about the structural dimensions of racial inequity in schooling and achievement (Gillborn, 2005).

Critical Race Theory, Whiteness, and structural racism

We turn shortly to a description of the district trainings and to teacher responses to these trainings in order to engage a Critical Race Theory (CRT) structural analysis of racism. First, however, we introduce CRT, our general theoretical framework, and specifically Harris' concept of Whiteness as property, which we use to analyze our data. Critical Race Theory operates on three basic premises: that racism is pervasive; that racism is permanent; and that racism must be challenged (Bell 1992; Bernal 2002; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, and Parker 2002; Tate 1997). Central to CRT is the notion that racism is a pervasive, systemic condition, not merely an individual pathology. Racism is a vast system that structures our institutions and our relationships. Second, racism adapts to socio-cultural changes by altering its expression, but it never diminishes or disappears. Finally, critical race theorists hold that scholarship that challenges social inequities must take into account systemic racism and must counter positivist notions of neutral, colorblind inquiry. Throughout this article, we will frame the teacher and administrator responses to the district trainings with CRT in order to examine the ways in which participants' reactions to the concepts promoted in the trainings *both* illuminated their understandings and experiences of race and racism *and* reflected the larger socio-cultural racial structures that informed their thinking (Ladson-Billings 2000b).

Although a number of analytic tools have developed out of CRT (i.e. interest convergence, empathic fallacy, and so on), we draw specifically on the concept of Whiteness as property (Harris 1993). Harris explains Whiteness as property as, in part, the 'legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination' (p. 1715). Whiteness as property is a concept that reflects the conflation of Whiteness with the exclusive rights to freedom, to the enjoyment of certain privileges, and to the ability to draw advantage from these rights. As Harris explains, it came to be that individuals owned their Whiteness and the associated rights of freedom and privilege, both of which were expected and protected by the structural collapse of property and rights. She describes this collapse by noting that 'to be identified as white' was 'to have the property of being white. Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings' (1993, 1721). This characteristic was transformed by legal and societal structural practice: 'According whiteness actual legal status converted an aspect of identity into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest' (1993, 1725). In this way, individual White persons came to exercise, benefit from, and mutually create and recreate a larger structural system of collective, institutional White privilege. The societal systems that sustain the reign of White race privilege are peopled and the concurrent, interactive acts of individuals and systems inexorably reinforce and entrench pervasive racial power across institutions, sites, and events.

Methodologies and research contexts

The data for this article are drawn from two separate ethnographic studies. During the 2002–2003 school year, Vaught undertook a multi-site ethnographic study of racism and the achievement gap in a West Coast urban district she calls Jericho (Vaught 2006). And, in

2004–2005, Castagno conducted a multi-sited ethnographic investigation of multicultural education in Zion, an urban district located in the Rocky Mountain region (Castagno 2006). Data for both studies were collected through formal and informal interviews, observation, and participation in Jericho and Zion. For the purposes of this article, we draw primarily on interview data with teachers and administrators across the districts. It is important to note that we not only identified participants racially, but were raced by participants in the context of these interviews and observations. Castagno was consistently raced White, while Vaught was raced in shifting ways depending on the racial, cultural, and political locations of the participant. Significantly, White participants regularly assumed a shared racial identity with Vaught.

Both studies draw on critical methodologies (Anderson 1989; Anyon 1997; Carspecken and Walford 2001; Fine and Weis 1998) and critical feminist approaches (Foster 1996; Luttrell 1997; Stacey 1988) to ethnography, which make central to their practice and purpose the challenging of societal power inequities. In particular, many scholars from these theoretical and methodological traditions have suggested that ethnographic scholarship tells the story of a particular, local setting, but that it also has implications for the larger, national, cultural system from which the localized practices emerge. This attention to the reinforcing processes between individual actions and expressions and societal structures is essential to our work for two reasons: first, we are able to ethically challenge racist structures without suggesting that local individuals or organizations are unique or are simply and singularly culpable; and, second, we are able to adhere to the core assertion of CRT that racism is not merely an individual pathology, but a cultural system which is played out in our institutions – here, schools (Lawrence 1993).

The Jericho and Zion Public School districts are two large urban systems with racially diverse student populations. The racial breakdown of the student population in the Jericho Public School district was as follows: 23% African American; 40% White; 23% Asian American/Pacific Islander; 11% Chicano/a and Latino/a; and 3% First Nation. The certified staff in Jericho were: 10% African American; 78% White; 9% Asian American/Pacific Islander; 2% Chicano/a and Latino/a; and 1% First Nation. In Zion 4% of students were African American, 48% were White, 10% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 35% were Chicano/a and Latino/a, and 2% were First Nation.¹ While over 50% of students in Zion are students of color, less than 10% of the certified staff in the district identify as such. In both Jericho and Zion there were persistent racialized achievement gaps. In the spring of 2003 in Jericho, that achievement gap appeared as follows: while over 70% of White students were passing the single, high-stakes test soon to be tied to graduation, 92% of African American children were failing it; on a 9th grade standardized test used as a student competency measure of the district's high-stakes standards, 51% of Black, 66.7% of Samoan, and only 9.8% of White children were below standard; and the expulsion rate for Black students was triple that for Whites. In Zion, similar gaps existed. While White and Asian American students scored over 80% on the district's Criterion Reference Test in both Math and Language Arts, for example, all other racialized student groups scored an average of below 60%. In both districts, there existed vast racialized differences in GPA, enrollment in honors, graduation rates, SAT scores, and disciplinary action.

Partly in response to these gaps and to the attendant publicity and pressure, both districts adopted professional developments aimed at increasing racial, ethnic, and cultural awareness among teachers and administrators in hopes of alleviating the achievement gap. In the 2002–2003 school year, Jericho Public School's senior leadership contracted an outside organization to deliver a district-wide, anti-bias, teacher and administrator training. Like many districts nationwide, Jericho Public School was under pressure both from federal

policy mandates and public concern to raise test scores and close the proverbial achievement gap. The intention of the program, as explained by the central leadership of Jericho Public School, was to address the racialized achievement gap by creating greater awareness and understanding of race, racism, and cultural difference amongst teachers and administrators. Although participation was not mandated through negotiations with the teachers' union, all teachers were asked to attend and were offered typical in-service compensation. Attendance was high and widespread throughout the year. The training in Zion was developed and delivered by a different organization than the one in Jericho, but it was similar in that it focused on cultural difference and awareness. The Zion district administration implemented this professional development training as part of a multicultural education policy, which was created largely in response to community pressure to better meet the needs of students of color in the district. The training was voluntary and participation was not expected; consequently, very few teachers throughout the district attended.

Because these training programs were not unlike many other 'diversity' workshops implemented in other districts across the country and aimed at altering teacher bias, participant responses reveal critical insight not only into the particular workings of these trainings, but into the dilemma of districts relying on professional development to close a racialized achievement gap that is structural in nature. In other words, we suggest that there is an inherent and problematic tension in attempting to address a systemic and structural problem (in this case, the achievement gap) solely through individual transformation. A Whiteness as property analysis of participant responses to the trainings allows those responses to serve as a window through which to view the tension between the individual and structural in efforts to challenge racism. As will become clear through our data analysis and discussion, this awkward pairing of a structural problem with an individual solution is *both* illustrative of the entrenchment of race and racism in the United States *and* fails to result in greater equity in schools.

In the following pages, we examine a range of participant narratives and begin to connect them to the structural dimension of racial awareness and understanding. First, we explore data that narrate participant self-perceptions as both individuals and members of racial groups, highlighting the structural implications of divergent self-perceptions. Second, we examine teacher responses to the concept of White privilege. And, third, we highlight the messages teachers took from the trainings regarding the importance of cultural awareness. Throughout this discussion, our data will reveal the specific components of Whiteness as property. We close with a discussion of the implications of using teacher attitudes as a window onto structural racial inequity and, specifically, the role of White privilege and awareness in challenging structural inequities.

'That wasn't the point': White privilege and individualism

In Jericho, many participants responded to the trainings by talking about the concept of White privilege (Fine 1997; Lee 2005; McIntosh 1988). Among White participants, definitions of White privilege varied. One typical understanding of the concept is captured in the conversation that follows. In this conversation, a White female teacher was discussing her ancestors and their role, or lack thereof, in slavery:

- Teacher: So, I'm sorry that that happened. I'm sorry that in Bosnia, when the Croats and the Serbians and all those people were fighting that they were committing genocide, but you know what? Just because I'm of those nationalities, doesn't mean that I did it. Or that I believe in it any more than they personally believe in it. Ok. Now they would say that's White denial. That's me not, just not acknowledging that I have White privilege, because I am White.

Vaught: How do you see that privil—

Teacher: White privilege is being able to go into a restaurant ... and not even care who's in the restaurant cause you know nobody's gonna be attacking your race.

Significantly, in this exchange this teacher initially dismantled the structural component of White privilege by defining White privilege as an individual benefit drawn only from individual actions. The teacher positioned race, ethnicity, and national origin as interchangeable. Then she suggested that the resulting conglomerate identity accrued power (and so responsibility) through action and history. Being of Slavic decent, she argued, did not make her any more culpable of atrocities in Serbia than being White made her accountable for slavery. Here, she cast race as historical and national (Gotanda 1995; Winant 2001) and as such defined a Whiteness that only benefited from privilege resulting from direct participation in historical atrocities. By doing so, she distanced herself from the larger societal power structures that continuously (as opposed to historically) and mutually reinforce the privileges of individual Whites. When Vaught began to ask her about her mention of White privilege, she illustrated it as the ability to function freely in society. While this statement acknowledged more explicitly that there are differences in experience based on race, which are not bound by personal choices to participate in genocide, for example, it still perpetuated a normative notion of individual Whiteness. She did not suggest, for example, who might be in a restaurant attacking a person of color on the basis of race. Instead, Whites are positioned as free of attack. This is the discursive extent of their privilege. Similarly, other White teachers discussed not being followed by security or clerks in department stores as illustrative of the benefits of White privilege. While these examples were perhaps accurate, they were limited to a narrow understanding of stereotypes and how those stereotypes affected individuals. But more importantly, these understandings of White privilege simply addressed the ability to be free of scrutiny and did not capture even a nascent understanding of the ways in which power over others (not freedom from attack) benefits Whites individually and collectively.

As Vaught spoke with White teachers at Martin Luther King High School (MLKHS) about the training in Jericho, 'White privilege' consistently emerged as a catchphrase for their understanding of the awareness they should have around issues of racism. In her characterization of White privilege, McIntosh (1988) acknowledges that racism is not defined singularly by personal bias or hostility, but by systemic, 'arbitrarily-awarded' (p. 12) privilege unrecognized by benefiting Whites. However, the central thrust of McIntosh's oft-cited piece is awareness. Whether her intention or not, the common use of White privilege now makes salient two characteristics: its purported invisibility; and, the importance of being *individually aware* of privilege. In the context of this study, these definitional emphases were expressed repeatedly in White teacher conceptualizations of White privilege. Because so many White teachers consistently relied on such definitions, racial power (and so racism) was never truly engaged as a structural phenomenon. Relegated to the personal, White racial privilege failed to conceptually shift the focus to racial power inequities that structure institutions of schooling and the racial pattern of student school failure.

The concept of White privilege did not even enter the discourse of White teachers in Zion. The ways in which they articulated their understanding of the achievement gap and multiculturalism stopped with cultural difference and did not extend to conversations about racial power and privilege. Significantly, there was no evidence that White teachers in Zion were familiar with notions of White privilege or power. Out of the many teachers and administrators Castagno interviewed, only one teacher, a male teacher of color, referenced the notion of White privilege. He explained that the concept arose in education courses he took with other district teachers at the local university:

I mean I noticed a lot of, well, I mean, a lot of our teachers here are Caucasian. Um, they were very resistant to some of the ah, I can't remember what it was called. They were offended by ah, I think it was White privileges is how it was ah, termed ... Oh, but yeah, there were some good, I thought interesting things that came up but we kind of just glossed over them because they offended people or they got, you know, they wouldn't accept that is the way things are. They said, I'm not like that. And that wasn't the point ... it's the point that you have to understand that is how some people feel.

His primary perception was that White teachers were resistant to notions of their own racialized power. Notably, White teachers' objections that they were 'not like that' obscured the structural nature of White privilege, even as those White teachers exercised tremendous collective power in shutting down a conversation about race.

According to many teachers in Jericho, the notion of White privilege was central to much of the anti-bias professional development training; consequently, it became a common topic during interviews. While a couple of White teachers in Jericho communicated to Vaught a desire to understand and embrace the racial power concepts they described as learning through the trainings, most White teachers expressed a resistance to the concept of White privilege. The following conversation between Vaught and a White, female teacher focused explicitly on one of the recent trainings this teacher had attended. The teacher raised the issue of White privilege and Vaught asked if that teacher believed she experienced White privilege within Martin Luther King High School:

Absolutely not ... if I discipline a student, and they know it's [me]. If [I] had Black skin they would just say, okay, this is correct. [I don't] have Black skin, so they wonder what went on. And second guess me.

In a separate interview about the concepts related to the training, a different White, female teacher echoed this idea that White privilege did not function within the high school:

I think it's probably because there's actually no, there's no power here. You know what I mean? In other words, like I'm not, I mean, by power I mean like, really power power ... Like, you're outta here. Bye. Type power that I'm talkin' about. And I don't think that there's that type of power here.

A third teacher, a White male teaching in the same high school, also repeated this perception of White privilege. When Vaught asked if he thought White privilege operated within Martin Luther King High School, he replied:

Oh, oh. Uhm, I, I'd be surprised. Uhm, and not through my perception. You know, I mean, it's like, you know, we're, they're more White teachers here than other teachers. *But*, we're in a school which is mostly minority – Afro-American, Samoan, you now, uh, Asian. Uhm, and, being in such a school, with, uhm, the emphasis being on, uhm, Afro-American kids, minority, things like that, I don't see that as prevalent as maybe in a, an all-White school with, you know, token Black teachers there, or something.

These denials of the existence or function of White privilege – of systemic, racialized power not solely individually created and enacted – were common among many White teachers at MLKHS. Significantly, embedded in these dismissals of systemic race privilege was a belief that racial dynamics were defined by the isolated numerical presence of one race or another in a specific location, not on societal power, and motivated by nothing more than sheer volume. These assumptions illuminate the complexity of addressing racial power in our cities' most struggling schools, which are often peopled predominantly by students of

color and White teachers. Unable to recognize that White racial power permeates every institution, teachers fail to understand how race and racism inform low student achievement, among other factors.

This perception was echoed in Zion, where a White female teacher discussed with Castagno her belief that the absence of institutionalized racism at her school had to do with the numerical majority of students of color in the building:

[Birch] is maybe not the interesting place to be, to find out a take on ethnicity and views of ethnicity. Perhaps the place to be is a place where – well, like minorities are a majority here. Maybe here is not the place to reveal institutional racism. Because it's not um, if there is institutional racism going on, it wouldn't reveal itself in a school where the minority are the majority. It would reveal itself in a school where the minority are the minority. The minority *are* the minority. Because it's a Federal designation of what minority is. In fact I freaked out the first time when I looked at um, there's a column that the Federal Government tracks and it says the language claimed is the first language and then on the spreadsheet it says whether they are a minority or they are not a minority. And then I went, wait, ok so minority means non-white? That's what minority means. Ok, I kind of freaked out on that.

White privilege, and institutionalized racism, was understood by teachers in Jericho and Zion as contingent upon local context and so was cast as an entirely individual experience. They communicated no recognition that their privilege moved with them from context to context and that their authority as White teachers of children of color was highly powerful and determinative (Delpit 1988). And, they seemed unaware of the fact that White institutions create power hierarchies with or without the immediate presence of White students (Fine 1997; Fordham 1996; Lipman 2004). As one mixed White/First Nation female teacher suggested to Vaught, 'I think that all Whites don't understand the fact that they're privileged because they are White.'

Using Whiteness as property (Harris 1995) as a theoretical lens through which to examine the concept of White privilege helps us to understand why the concept of White privilege is limited and perhaps ineffective. Harris explains that historically Whiteness became conflated with property in a legal and societal system in which rights were achieved through individual ownership. Whiteness has become singularly inseparable from humanity, individuality, and personal freedom. Accordingly, these White teachers understood White privilege as singularly an individual experience and failed to recognize its systemic, structural component. While they recognized the existence of White privilege, they did not acknowledge its distribution across Whites and across settings.

Whiteness and 'the continued right to determine meaning'

One component of Whiteness as property that is critical to our understanding of teacher constructions of White privilege and race power is 'the continued right to determine meaning' (Harris 1993, 1762). The teachers above engaged in this right by taking the concept of White privilege presented in the trainings and adopting and adapting elements of the concept in ways that fit a pre-existing racial framework. Our data suggest that the framework within which they were working was that racism and White privilege are inextricable, and that they are exclusively individual issues. As critical race theorists point out, racism is not an individual pathology, rather it is a systemic structural problem that is constructed and maintained by the collective acts of many individuals, but which is larger and far more powerful than any individual (Crenshaw 1997; Guinier and Torres 2002; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Parker and Lynn 2002). What is important here, then, is that these teachers

were not just individually but simultaneously creating meaning themselves; they were tapping into and recreating meanings that already existed within the district's structural practices and within the larger society. For example, teachers we interviewed and observed consistently and separately determined the meaning of racial power and privilege as a numbers issue. In other words, they explicitly linked the absence of their own racial privilege with participation in a localized numerical majority (read: 'a Black school'). These definitions revealed the ways in which the districts, as an institution of Whiteness, engaged in the White property practice of normalizing structures and isolating individual behaviors. As Harris notes, one of the attendant rights of Whiteness as a property is the right to retain and protect individualism. She defines rights as 'shields from interference' (1993, 1778). This protection and the inherent dismissal of collective racial rights means that 'existing inequities are obscured and rendered nearly invisible' (1993, 1777). Therefore, these teachers' and their White colleagues' responses to and understandings of White privilege reveal not merely an individual misconception to be understood and addressed as individual teachers' racism, but in fact a collective misconception enacted by those individual teachers both in creation of and response to the larger, collective structural practices of the district.

Understood through the lens of Whiteness as property, the fact that many White teachers defend themselves as not being implicated in racism or White privilege is a logical consequence and expression of their epistemological frame (Ladson-Billings 2000b). Because Whiteness as property assumes the salience of the individual, to accept personal accountability for race privilege would position these White teachers as ultimately culpable instead of as participants in a larger structure that they can collectively challenge and change, or be asked to change. What this means is that individual White teachers may perceive that they are being asked to individually carry the burden of a problem that is structural, systemic, and collective. Training individuals to question and challenge their own experiences of White privilege without training them to understand how individual experiences and behaviors are both drawn from and constituent of structural privilege and power assumes that change can occur effectively on the individual level. However, Whiteness as property clearly challenges this assumption. We suggest that although understanding White privilege must be an element of teacher training – as individuals certainly must understand and make efforts to change their own practices – it should be reframed through the lens of Whiteness as property in order to counter the appropriation of White privilege into the individualistic and unaccountable White epistemological race paradigms that our data reveal. This is particularly important as districts attempt to utilize individual concepts of race and privilege to address major racial structural issues, such as the achievement gap. The structural force of racism obviates the possibility that individual training alone could remedy the racialized achievement gap.

Because Jericho and Zion Public Schools did not address the achievement gap as a structural issue, they allowed an individualized understanding of the sources of the gap to persist. For example, neither district incorporated racialized analyses of policies or organizational practices at the central administrative and school levels. Teachers and principals were neither encouraged nor invited to think about how classroom practice, school structure, and district policies might be interconnected forms of White race power that function in concert to perpetuate schools' failure to adequately educate children of color. In addition, the districts confused what they projected as the individual source of the achievement gap – teachers in classrooms – with an overtly individualized racism defined by attitude, not power. District administrators shared that they felt many teachers simply carried misunderstandings of their students' 'cultures' or that they did not have proper training in teaching 'different' students. However, the teachers above explained that because they worked in diverse schools, and so did not believe they had *privilege* (conflated here with attitude, not power) within the

schools, they were thus not implicated in the problem. So, in the absence of an explicitly structural understanding of racism, many White teachers drew on the propertied right to determine meaning to construct a definition of White privilege devoid of attention to structural power. In so doing, these White teachers ironically exercised their real White privilege – the propertied right to determine racial meaning – to deny their individual participation in the collective, structural racism that perpetuates racialized student failure. This is an exclusive right only engaged by the dominant racial group. Significantly, these meaning making practices exclude definitions of White privilege that account for collective power.

‘I don’t feel like I’m racist’: individualism and formal equality

Evidence that White property is individualized by Whites and White institutions and not recognized as collective emerged in our interviews. This section focuses on stories from teachers and administrators that illustrate how they viewed themselves as either individuals or as members of groups. We begin with narratives of White participants and later juxtapose those with narratives by teachers and administrators of color.

A White male member of the Jericho Public Schools senior leadership discussed the impetus behind the in-service, anti-bias training sponsored by the district and the source of inequities in school achievement:

One of the great motivators of [this training] ... And, uh, that is so critical for, ah, finding a way to take – we have thirty-seven hundred teachers – to move them to a space where they will be fluent in connecting with kids whose cultural context is deeply different [long pause] from theirs ... [W]e’re asking a set of people that, uhm, have not had much history [pause] in dealing with low income kids, African American kids, being able to build strong and compelling personal relationships with, starting to create an environment where they can learn.

Notably, this senior district administrator located the source of the achievement gap and the impetus for the training to help remedy this gap with teachers. His characterization was of racially un-marked White teachers who must change their pedagogical and personal style to reach ‘low income kids’, whom he defined as ‘African American kids’ (a category which, across the district, included Pacific Islander children). Though he identifies both class and race, which reflect deep structural components, he glosses over this possibility and focuses on ‘culture’ and ‘personal relationships’ in this culturally defined framework. This ‘deeply different’ culture was the focus for many participants and was often used in place of explicit reference to race. This substitution of culture was significant, as participants did not conceive of cultures as differentially powered or in power relationships with one another. Cultural misunderstandings, rather than racism, occurred between individual teachers and groups of students, were devoid of power, and could be remedied through individual teacher understanding. In fact, when Vaught shared with a White female school board member that she had heard from many people that Jericho Public Schools had problems with racism amongst its teachers, she said, ‘Oh golly. You know, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m sure we do. We have three thousand teachers.’ However, she quickly explained what the district was doing to remedy this possible problem: the training program. She elaborated that the training was all about cultural awareness for individual (read: White) teachers. Because culture was used in place of race in part to individualize the structural problem of racialized achievement and cast it as the isolated struggles of individual teachers working with ‘different’ students, the racialized structural barriers that informed, maintained, and entrenched individual practice went unnoticed. Focusing on culture provides a way to deflect power. While addressing the notion of culture might appear to be a recognition of collective

identity, when it is approached in a structural vacuum, it is only a recognition of the collective identity of the Other. Students of color are recognized only as members of collectives while teachers are afforded the propertied right of individualism. Talking about cultural difference maintains the status quo and makes it look neutral, embodying the neutrality central to Whiteness as property (Harris 1993). This focus falsely defines the playing field and ensures that there will be no understanding of power as structural. One material manifestation of this emphasis on culture in both Zion and Jericho was the development and use of 'culture capsules' and 'culture grams'. In Jericho, the district was following up on the anti-bias training by developing what one school board member called 'culture capsules'. Though she had not yet seen one, she said they were 'kind of like little vignettes of different cultures. You know, like Cliff's Notes for different cultures that teachers can look at'. In Zion, the culture grams were nearly identical. They were explained to Castagno as online summaries of specific ethnic groups (without reference to race) that teachers were encouraged to use to learn about the 'culture' of their students. Because the achievement gaps in Jericho and Zion were so glaringly evident, it was in the interest of the White leadership of both districts to acknowledge difference. The focus on difference in the form of culture conveniently converged with their common worldview that celebrating and overcoming difference *defined* American equality and *gave legitimacy* to meritocracy (Crenshaw 1997; Kennedy 1995). The use of culture as a substitute for race not only elided the enormous racial disparities across measures in both districts, but drew on a romanticized, dominant narrative notion of the history of cultural assimilation in the US – one that functioned on the basis of collective and individual merit – ostensibly experienced by Italians or Irish, for example. Several participants in fact drew on their own White family histories to emphasize this cultural ideology and to give it supremacy over the role, function, and existence of race. In this way, participants used their own or family members' success to legitimate meritocracy and deny structural models of understanding power difference.

However, along with the propertied right to define Whites as individuals and Others as members of cultural groups is attached individualized blame. Without acknowledgement of the collective White structure of school districts as institutions, individual teachers are singled out as having personal difficulties when in fact their difficulties are drawn from and reflect (and reproduce) the structural nature of White property. Further, the relegation of students of color to cultural groups both denies their individuality (a quality revered under the system of propertied rights) and reduces their collective identity to a simplistic, unified whole, thus setting up individual White teachers in opposition to large groups of reductively racialized students. In the discursive representations of central administration and in the districts' rationale for instituting the anti-bias trainings, White teachers were positioned as hyper-individualized. As a consequence, many White teachers revealed that they therefore perceived themselves as singularly blamed for the racialized achievement gap. This perception, in unfortunate concert with the construction of students of color as cultural groups alone, resulted in a backlash that entrenched pre-existing racism. White teachers, feeling overwhelmingly defensive, denied White power, while they simultaneously appropriated an understanding of culture that reduced students of color in the districts to static, stereotypical collectives – dehumanized wholes, denied the property of rights which inheres only in individuals.

Expressing individuality is an ultimate freedom in a society based on property. By focusing on the individual and by seeing teachers solely as individuals instead of different and overlapping groups, districts fail to recognize the structural and systemic elements of racism. And, by attempting to promote structural change through individuals who are entrenched in a system of heightened individualism, districts put teachers on the defensive.

A common expression of this defensiveness is to engage narratives that heighten the individual/collective dichotomy.

When Vaught asked one White male teacher if he thought the training was a worthwhile program for the district to have adopted and what he considered the aim of it to be, he replied:

Well, I mean, I think, for me, ah, again this is gonna sound probably like an ignorant response, but, I mean I don't feel like I'm racist, so I don't think it's gonna have as much impact on me, cause I'm teaching at [Martin Luther King] ... And, uhm, and, so for me it doesn't, I think for other people it, who might not be associated with these students, uhm, a lot of Afro-American or Hispanic or Samoan kids, I think it could be beneficial, if they're kind of isolated in their cubicle, you know.

Like a strikingly large number of his White colleagues, this teacher illogically collapsed the fact of his teaching at a predominantly Black school with the unlikelihood or impossibility of personal racism (Kailin 1999). In his new awareness, he did not conceive of himself as a structural player, nor did he understand racism as a systemic, institutional dynamic (Bell 1987; Guinier 1994; Hacker 1995; Omi and Winant 1994; West 2004); rather, he understood himself to be free of what he embraced as an individual pathology (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Importantly, this White teacher conflated his lack of structural awareness and understanding with his individual sense that his willing association with students of color made him a non-racist. He reifies the belief promoted by the district and embedded in the individualism of the property of Whiteness that racism is a function of individual perception – a conceptualization of racism bereft of collective power dynamics.

A White female teacher from MLKHS responded to Vaught's questions about the training by saying they were not useful and that race was not one of the school's 'real issues'. She characterized the trainings as a 'band-aid' for other problems, such as individuals' poor teaching in the building. When Vaught asked what this teacher felt should be discussed, she replied:

It's hard to say. I think. I think it's more, to me it's more of an individual problem than a, than a school problem ... I don't look at it as a conspiracy against *me* because of my color. I, I look at certain individuals and say, 'Gosh, this person's a jerk, that person's a jerk.' And I know that because, uhm, because I am coming from a White background that I don't take that as, as a, I don't take it as because of my race. And I know that if it was reversed, uhm, because, if somebody's been discriminated against their whole lives, they're gonna see that as having to do with race; whereas, I don't.

This particular teacher was able to recognize that people of color experience discrimination constantly. In spite of that recognition, she asserted that racism was not a problem within her school. The problem, she claimed, inhered in individuals alone. While acknowledging her White frame of reference, she nonetheless explained the Black frame of reference as equally influenced by experience. Further, she characterized both frames of reference as affected by common, if not collective, intra-group experiences, but as defined by the individual experience. This adaptation of the propertied rights of individual Whiteness to the discourse around culture and race reflects what Harris (1993) suggests is the ability of White property to constantly modify itself to fit shifting societal expectations and contexts. This teacher embraced difference as explaining the differing outcomes of personal experience, informed by societal patterns such as race discrimination. Her adaptation of a frame of difference emerged throughout the conversation as she simultaneously acknowledged and articulated the facets of White privilege and relegated racism to individual purveyors and, notably, *recipients*.

This semiotic tip of the hat reflects a new ritual of White property: to ostensibly name itself as a means of asserting indirect authority and control over meaning-making. In the data excerpted above and in the larger interview conversation, this teacher comfortably suggested that the experience of racism was possibly concocted in the minds of individuals as a response to their different experiences. A person of color, she claimed, is going to experience an individual being a 'jerk' as 'having to do with race'. Most tellingly, she juxtaposed that understanding with her assertion that she would not perceive an individual's behavior as a reflection of 'race' (read: racism). So, while she acknowledged, to some degree, the fact that people of color experience racism, she followed immediately with an ostensibly sympathetic assessment that suggests the judgment of people of color is qualified by their experience of racism. Significantly, she never responded to the initial question posed to her. Her position was not unlike that of many White teachers interviewed, who repeatedly cast people of color as reactive in their understandings of interactions and relationships. This understanding, however, was, with few exceptions, stated as a form of understanding 'difference'. This position actually reiterates with striking resonance one of the purposes of the training articulated by one member of the Jericho Public School senior leadership above. Rather than have White teachers understand racism, the leadership hoped to have them understand the *different* perceptions, or worldviews, of 'culturally' (i.e. racially) different people.

One male teacher of color in Zion offered a critique of these individualized self-narrations of race as property, and of the conflation of race and culture; he instead posited a more collective understanding of experience:

But there are certain things that you might take for granted if you are White, which is not even a culture, I hate saying White, but you know, people were amazed that I felt sometimes some hesitancy about doing certain things because I'm not White. They were amazed by that. And I told the incident of where I came home one day and there was a rock thrown through my window. And I said most people would say that was just kids, if you were White you would say that is just kids fooling around, but I have to think about is it just kids fooling around or is it somebody that doesn't like me because of my ethnicity? Is it ah, somebody is targeting me? When I go to a store sometimes to return items, I get a little bit worried that they are going to say, that they are going to reject my return, they are not going to trust me, it doesn't happen but it's always in the back of my mind. I mean, I don't just go walk in there with confidence and think that they are going to just let me have what I want.

Embedded in this narrative is a critique of the individualization of propertied race rights. This teacher of color rejected the 'culture' model of race in favor of 'ethnicity' race, defined here by the presence or absence of privilege. In doing so, he drew on personal experiences such as vandalism and shopping to illustrate his statement that White teachers in the trainings did not understand or were surprised by his race-based feelings. However, he framed these anecdotes as representative of a larger system of race power and privilege – an individual-centered analysis of structural phenomenon. Because racist vandalism is still quite real across the US and because customer service is still frequently tied to the race of the customer, this teacher explains how these structural realities shape not just his perceptions, but also his knowledge, his choices, and his freedom. Countering the White teacher above who believed that people of color often had skewed perceptions because of individual encounters with racism, this teacher of color explained to Castagno that his perceptions were based on an awareness of a larger system of racism.

Expanding on this critique of the individualization of racial power, a principal of color in Jericho spoke about the district's approach to addressing racial inequities in school and his feeling that he was left alone to fend for his own students, overwhelmingly students of color. When Vaught asked him if there was any way he alone could fight racism effectively

on behalf of his students and create equity within his school, he replied, 'I can't. Cause I think it's a collective effort. Not only is there a collective effort, but I also believe that there has to be a collective *will* to undo what is wrong.' That 'collective will' is reference to a larger, structural shift that would need to occur in conjunction with the dismantling of individualized White property rights. Importantly, both people of color and Whites who expressed critical insight into the structural underpinnings of racially inequitable schooling and achievement never directed *blame* to individual teachers or suggested that a remedy be sought singularly through the improvement of individual teachers' attitudes. Instead, they spoke of collective accountability. While they consistently affirmed the importance of the responsibility of individual teachers to equity, they articulated the path to that responsibility as one that included collective transformation. These participants captured what Lawrence (1993) writes so poignantly:

The institutionalization of white supremacy within our culture has created conduct on the societal level that is greater than the sum of individual racist acts. The racist acts of millions are mutually reinforcing and cumulative because the status quo of institutionalized white supremacy remains long after deliberate racist actions subside (p. 61).

On the other hand, those Whites and people of color who did not level structural critiques were stuck blaming teachers because locating the problem on an individual level was the only explanation available to them within a system of Whiteness as property. This reflects the district's liberal interest (Guinier 2004) in promoting a discursively moral critique of racism, but maintaining the larger structures that fail to promote true equity for children of color. In other words, the liberal interest is defined by working within and relying upon existing structures, and assuming that those structures are just and equitable. In Jericho and Zion Public Schools, this would imply that the structure of the school systems is good, but that changes need to be made within individuals who reside inside that structure. This new racism (Giroux 1994) adopts the liberal discourse but avidly supports the legitimization (Crenshaw 1995) of the system as a whole and positions individual teachers as culprits.

This legitimization is a function of Whiteness as property that, like hegemony (Gramsci 1971), reifies the status quo by appearing to extend privileges and rights to non-dominant members of the society. For example, Black children were extended the right to attend historically all-White schools. However, this right did not include the structural changes to these institutions which would have been necessary for providing equitable educational experiences for these Black children (Bell 1995, 2004; Guinier 2004). Legitimation, then, is the outcome of what Harris (1995) defines as 'formal equality'. 'Formal equality,' she writes, 'overlooks structural disadvantage and requires mere non-discrimination or 'equal treatment'' (p. 289). The essential flaw and primary purpose of formal equality is that it protects and perpetuates the property vested in Whiteness and not only falls shy of, but blights equity. A mixed White/First Nation teacher in Jericho, referring to the racialized achievement gap and addressing the training undertaken by the district, explained succinctly:

And, you can't take equality and make things equal, because they're not equal. They never have been equal. They're not equal now ... So, it's racism by privilege. It's White privilege. It's not overt. It's very underneath. Ok. That's what's goin' on here.

'One of the great cop outs': the pitfalls of awareness

Strikingly, acknowledging a kind of White privilege is a form of entrenching White property by extending formal equality through the hyper-individualized discourse of liberal

self-awareness. This self-awareness is limited, however, because it is not accompanied by a structural awareness. The very nature of legitimation is that it is deceptive. The formal equality that legitimates systems confuses superficial change at the individual level with structural transformation.

Teachers and administrators in both Zion and Jericho Public Schools characterized the trainings as focusing on awareness and some questioned that focus in the absence of action. A White female central office administrator told Castagno that in terms of training the teachers get in the Zion district, it makes them 'sensitive and aware' but the 'in depth training is not there'. A White female teacher in Zion said, 'I think it gives you awareness but I don't feel like either of them gives you um, ah, you're in the classroom right now, what are you going to do about it.' This disconnect between awareness and change was also captured by an African American principal in Jericho, who said:

I just believe that [this training] just created greater awareness, just awareness. But it didn't change behavior. Because one would actually have to examine themselves and that is a hurting process. To admit, to have to admit, not to others, but just to yourself, that what I do brings harm to children. That hurts ... That's *not* gonna happen.

As this administrator identified, individual awareness alone did not bring about transformation. His critique suggests again that the myopic focus on individual teachers was unsuccessful because it 'hurt' to be held singularly responsible for harming children – in this case, causing the racialized achievement gap. With discerning acuity, he described one of the reactions of many White teachers to the trainings in Jericho: they were 'hurt' and defensive, and so rejected not only their own race privilege but also any potentially modest recognition of structural racial power inequities. Echoing the Jericho administrator above, a White male teacher in Zion critiqued his district's training as 'very surface level' and explained that it dealt only with cultural awareness. In response, he decided to develop trainings which dealt specifically with 'power and privilege'. He created these in collaboration with the Zion Public Schools and the Zion teachers' union and posted them on the district's professional development website. Because there was very low enrollment for this series of trainings, he was forced to cancel the offerings. In other words, an attempt to shift the focus of professional development away from awareness and towards structural issues was not widely viewed as important, interesting, or relevant.

Our findings indicated that within the American system of pervasive racism (Bell 1992), *awareness* was collapsed with *transformation*. This collapse illustrated the larger districts' legitimation of their inequitable structures. However, this use of awareness and focus on cultural difference resulted in a backlash. For those teachers who perceived difference as deficit, there was a slippery slope from the non-judgmental approach of awareness of cultural difference to the highly judgmental ideology of cultural, and so racial, deficiency (Sleeter and Grant 2003; Winant 2001). This was bolstered by the emphasis on White privilege and the understandable defensiveness of being individually implicated in structural racial inequities in schooling. The following White female teacher from Jericho discussed her perceptions of participating in the trainings with her school's Black administrators:

Teacher: Because one of the great cop outs when you're in a setting like this [training] is anything that I do to you is based on race, even if it isn't. I was angry with [the African American principal] because she lied to me, it's not because she's who she is, racially ... But on the other hand I think they're getting – I'm trying to teach them a better perspective on who a White teacher is. So anyway, I go to these meetings and ... if I raise my hand, he doesn't call me right, well so what. I don't raise

my hand that much in this group. And uhm, he'll come up and talk to [a Black teacher from the same school], a buddy kind of thing, and just completely ignore, because I'm a White (inaudible). That's my first instinct. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. But it feels like that. Especially in this setting [the training].

Vaught: That you're being ignored on the basis of race?

Teacher: It's like it's like, turnabout is fair play and now I'm here and because I look Aryan, if you will, I'm going to be treated like a racist when I don't think I am.

Significantly, this teacher responded to the trainings with a troubling combination of defensiveness and hostility. Instead of applying an understanding of racial power dynamics to her interactions with her Black colleagues and supervisors, she instead was threatened by what she perceived as the denial of her individuality – an absolute, inalienable right of White property – and as treatment as a member of a racial collective. A collective identity against which she balked. She argued to Vaught that pulling 'the race card' is a 'cop out' when done by people of color, yet she pulled the same card to explain what she perceived as her mistreatment by people of color. Within this framework of Whiteness as property, Whites are seen as individuals merely by virtue of being White and discrimination is only acknowledged when it occurs against Whites, as individuals. Thus, according to this rationale, if members of racialized groups are getting something, it is always and only on the basis of group identification. This teacher's own heightened awareness of individual Whiteness, without any awareness of structural racism, placed her squarely against people of color. By co-opting White privilege into an individualistic paradigm of Whiteness as property, this teacher entrenched the property of her own racial power by denying the individual experiences of people of color and erasing the collective power of Whites.

Her attitudes and comments were not unlike those of many White participants in the trainings in Jericho and Zion. To varying degrees, these teachers articulated an awareness of difference in place of differential power. Minus an attention to power, this defensiveness often degenerated into hostility and a sense of indignation at what they perceived as the lack of gratitude for their sacrifices (Gallagher 1997; Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; Ross 1997). This reflected that within a White property system, the districts' encouragement of individual awareness of difference was in fact inseparable from a denial of real and annihilative racial power. Worse, it sometimes promoted heightened animosity. In many cases 'awareness' created a racialized backlash veiled in the deceptive progress of formal equality.

The lack of structural change in both Zion and Jericho Public Schools was significant. The structural changes necessary to address racial inequity ran the gamut from funding to governance. Here, we offer two examples shared by a teacher and administrator. A very successful White male teacher at MLKHS in Jericho questioned the funding of these trainings in light of the marked absence of monies for technology at his school:

Teacher: [The training is] a waste; it's a waste of time.

Vaught: It's a waste of time? What do you think – ?

Teacher: That money should be more utilized and – perfect example, we have, I have what, twenty kids in my class? We only have fifteen computers that work. It had meat globs on their software. Ok, that hundred or million dollars you spent, you could spread that around. [Medgar Evers High School] and them have labs that are functional, but if you just spread it to [Thurgood Marshall High School], here, some of the middle schools, elementary schools, you gonna, you gonna serve more rights.

This teacher points to what he perceives as the problematic nature of the trainings in contrast with the structural, material realities of Black and Blackened (Ong 2000) student failure in his school. By sharing this data, we do not suggest that the structural racial inequities we

discuss are singularly material. Instead, we are offering one teacher's illustration of one particularly tangible facet of structural domination. An African American principal in another low-performing, predominantly Black high school shared a similar critique. She described how her entire high school was to be displaced for the second time in five years, ultimately in order to placate White communities' demands for certain buildings:

We want to eliminate the gap, but you want to displace the students who are entrapped in the gap? That to me says that eliminating the gap is truly not our intent. Now, it may sound good, it is good. But our *practice* is not good.

This principal went on to describe that 'practice' as the district's consistent failure to support students, teachers, administrators, and schools of color. Both of these participants were critical of the district efforts that offered formal equality through raising individual teacher awareness, but which failed to address the White propertied practices of perpetuating structural barriers to true racial equity.

Implications and conclusion

As we have shown, awareness did not lead to empathy amongst teachers, but resulted instead in a reinvention of meaning that reified existing, culturally constructed, racist frameworks. Further, these districts' lack of action in creating institutional change in conjunction with the trainings allowed the structural dimension of racism to persist unchallenged (Gillborn 2005), veiled as an individual pathology (Bell 1992; Crenshaw 1997; Harris 1995; Omi and Winant 1994) or worse, as formal equality. This suggests that barring structural transformation, racism adapts to any new ideology introduced, accommodating the discourse within a framework of continued racial supremacy. And, further, that by working within a White property framework, districts cannot address their own structural inequities.

By looking through the window of these teachers' attitudes onto the structural problems in the Jericho and Zion Public School districts, we see not only what is problematic, but a vision of what can be undertaken to begin to address the racialized achievement gap. Critical Race Theory offers a way to begin to address this through its own critique of Whiteness as property and the formal equality that undergirds and reproduces it. According to Harris (1993), the 'de-legitimation' of White property 'should be accomplished not merely by implementing equal treatment, but by equalizing treatment among the groups that have been illegitimately privileged or unfairly subordinated by racial stratification' (p. 1780). Harris offers a concrete conceptual means by which to approach this process of de-legitimation: 'distributive justice'. Distributive justice, she writes, is a conceptual frame in which both individuals and groups can make claim to the privileges or advantages they would have earned or received in an equitable context. Similarly, distributive justice 'also holds that individuals or groups may *not* claim positions, advantages, or benefits that they would *not* have been awarded under fair conditions' (p. 1784). Importantly, distributive justice 'does not focus primarily on guilt and innocence, but rather on entitlement and fairness' (p. 1783) and posits that, 'equal protection requires that individuals receive the share of the benefits they would have secured in the absence of racism' (p. 1783). Distributive justice speaks to the uneasy and clouded tension between equality and equity in the conflict between racial power and privilege as merely individual or collective, as defined by the interactions of individuals to create and recreate an institution larger than themselves. By moving beyond individual blame, distributive justice provides for structural understandings that require individual and collective accountability towards equity.

We suggest that in Zion and Jericho, distributive justice would include an emphasis on structural transformation. As Harris (1993) reminds us, 'what persists is the expectation of white-controlled institutions in the continued right to determine meaning – the reified privilege of power – that reconstitutes the property interest in whiteness in contemporary form' (p. 1762). Therefore, in both design and implementation, this transformation would necessarily include the distributive justice notion that groups within the districts contribute with the power and meaning-making authority they would have in the absence of existing structural racism. We also suggest that professional development is a healthy and essential part of change, if in fact that training focuses on the structural elements of racialized achievement inequities and gives all teachers tools to understand their position in structural systems and systemic change – positions that do not 'focus primarily on guilt and innocence' (p. 1783).

The responses of Zion's and Jericho's teachers and administrators to training programs touted by the districts as responses to the racialized achievement gaps in each district strongly indicate that, regardless of the merit of any one program, the collective, structural nature of Whiteness as property in schooling means that efforts at raising individual awareness cannot serve as the singular remedy for the achievement gap. The hegemonic, systemic interests of White property permits the co-optation of formal equality into racism. Awareness is collapsed with change. Difference is conflated with deficiency. Equality replaces equity. And, White privilege is countered by Black 'racism'.

The responses to the trainings catalogued in this article and the particular dynamics of racism which they reveal suggest (perhaps unsurprisingly) that without structural transformation, the fact and practice of racism will go unaltered and may become even further entrenched. These responses thus beg deeper questions of how to effectively challenge the achievement gap. What are the feasible structural changes that must be put in place to create true accountability to children of color? Is it truly necessary to focus on White privilege in order to create racially equitable achievement? How can distributive justice be effectively achieved within urban school systems?

Notes

1. While we stayed consistent with district-determined racial categories, we selected terms we felt most appropriate for those categories. For example, we replaced 'Hispanic' with 'Chicano/a and Latino/a'.

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